

AU/ACSC/021/1998-04

AIR COMMAND AND STAFF COLLEGE

AIR UNIVERSITY

LEADERSHIP IN FIGHTER SQUADRONS:  
DOES THE USAF PROPERLY PREPARE COMMANDERS?

by

Howard D. Belote, Major, USAF

A Research Report Submitted to the Faculty

In Partial Fulfillment of the Graduation Requirements

Advisor: Major Richard M. Perry

Maxwell Air Force Base, Alabama

April 1998

REPORT DOCUMENTATION PAGE			Form Approved OMB No. 0704-0188		
Public reporting burden for this collection of information is estimated to average 1 hour per response, including the time for reviewing instructions, searching existing data sources, gathering and maintaining the data needed, and completing and reviewing this collection of information. Send comments regarding this burden estimate or any other aspect of this collection of information, including suggestions for reducing this burden to Department of Defense, Washington Headquarters Services, Directorate for Information Operations and Reports (0704-0188), 1215 Jefferson Davis Highway, Suite 1204, Arlington, VA 22202-4302. Respondents should be aware that notwithstanding any other provision of law, no person shall be subject to any penalty for failing to comply with a collection of information if it does not display a currently valid OMB control number. PLEASE DO NOT RETURN YOUR FORM TO THE ABOVE ADDRESS.					
1. REPORT DATE (DD-MM-YYYY) 01-04-1998		2. REPORT TYPE Thesis		3. DATES COVERED (FROM - TO) xx-xx-1998 to xx-xx-1998	
4. TITLE AND SUBTITLE Leadership in Fighter Squadrons: Does the USAF Properly Prepare Commanders? Unclassified			5a. CONTRACT NUMBER		
			5b. GRANT NUMBER		
			5c. PROGRAM ELEMENT NUMBER		
			5d. PROJECT NUMBER		
6. AUTHOR(S) Belote, Howard D. ;			5e. TASK NUMBER		
			5f. WORK UNIT NUMBER		
			8. PERFORMING ORGANIZATION REPORT NUMBER		
7. PERFORMING ORGANIZATION NAME AND ADDRESS Air Command and Staff College Maxwell AFB, AL36112			10. SPONSOR/MONITOR'S ACRONYM(S)		
9. SPONSORING/MONITORING AGENCY NAME AND ADDRESS ,			11. SPONSOR/MONITOR'S REPORT NUMBER(S)		
12. DISTRIBUTION/AVAILABILITY STATEMENT A PUBLIC RELEASE ,					
13. SUPPLEMENTARY NOTES					
14. ABSTRACT In the USAF, the average fighter pilot never supervises enlisted personnel in his first twelve to fifteen years of service. His first direct supervisory role may occur when he becomes an operations officer or, even worse, a squadron commander. Prior to the 1991 ?objective wing? reorganization, when a fighter squadron commander led 30 officers and a handful of enlisted, such a late introduction to supervision of enlisted may have had little deleterious effect. However, since the current fighter commander leads an organization of 250-300 personnel, he or she must be ready to lead and create unit cohesion from day one. Unfortunately, current fighter career paths provide few opportunities to learn or practice that type of team-building and leadership. This research asks, therefore, how rated commanders learn the skills necessary for squadron command. Using a pilot study, interviews, and previously conducted survey research, the project examines the perceptions of recent fighter squadron commanders and senior non-commissioned officers to determine if the Air Force properly prepares rated officers for command. Are commanders trained in the current system successfully building cohesive teams? Further exploring the issue by comparing USAF squadron structure with that of the Marine Corps and Navy, the paper describes how future commanders might be better prepared for leadership roles, and offers practical suggestions to promote leadership development among junior and mid-level fliers.					
15. SUBJECT TERMS					
16. SECURITY CLASSIFICATION OF:		17. LIMITATION OF ABSTRACT Public Release	18. NUMBER OF PAGES 54	19. NAME OF RESPONSIBLE PERSON Fenster, Lynn lfenster@dtic.mil	
a. REPORT Unclassified	b. ABSTRACT Unclassified	c. THIS PAGE Unclassified	19b. TELEPHONE NUMBER International Area Code Area Code Telephone Number 703767-9007 DSN 427-9007		
				Standard Form 298 (Rev. 8-98) Prescribed by ANSI Std Z39.18	

## **Disclaimer**

The views expressed in this academic research paper are those of the author(s) and do not reflect the official policy or position of the US government or the Department of Defense. In accordance with Air Force Instruction 51-303, it is not copyrighted, but is the property of the United States government.

## *Contents*

	<i>Page</i>
DISCLAIMER .....	ii
LIST OF ILLUSTRATIONS.....	v
LIST OF TABLES .....	vi
PREFACE.....	vii
ABSTRACT .....	viii
INTRODUCTION .....	1
IS THERE A PROBLEM? .....	5
Pilot Study .....	6
Methodology .....	6
Results .....	7
Results of Previous Research .....	10
Summary.....	14
THE SOLUTION: A PARADIGM SHIFT .....	16
Barriers to Change .....	17
Seeds of Change.....	18
The Navy/Marine Model.....	21
RECOMMENDATIONS .....	25
Practical Solutions.....	26
Just do it.....	26
Use the “bathtub” .....	28
Improve current commander training.....	29
Implications for Further Research .....	31
Ask the NCOs .....	31
Examine the safety statistics .....	31
Clearly define the maintenance officer career path.....	32
CONCLUSION.....	34
APPENDIX A: PROJECT SURVEYS .....	39

APPENDIX B: TYPICAL MARINE FIGHTER SQUADRON .....	42
APPENDIX C: TYPICAL AIR FORCE FIGHTER SQUADRON .....	43
BIBLIOGRAPHY .....	44

## *Illustrations*

	<i>Page</i>
Figure 1. Survey Responses.....	7
Figure 2. Pilot Inventory By Years Of Service.....	28
Figure 3. Marine Squadron Organization.....	42
Figure 4. Marine Maintenance Organization.....	42
Figure 5. Air Force Squadron Organization .....	43

## *Tables*

	<i>Page</i>
Table 1. Survey Responses .....	39

## *Preface*

The title of this project, “Leadership in Fighter Squadrons,” may turn some readers away. I hope not, for I believe the ideas contained herein may be applicable throughout the Air Force. While I am a fighter pilot, I didn’t restrict my research out of an idea that the fighter squadron was the perfect model for all organizations to follow—I just focused on the area I understood best. If I’ve argued my case well, the reader will see that the recommendations can apply to all units where fliers lead non-fliers, especially in an objective wing.

That said, I must emphasize my conviction that aviators must always command combat flying units. I agree with Billy Mitchell’s concept of airmindedness, that only someone who has hands-on airpower experience can have the background and credibility to send aircrews into harm’s way. However, I’m equally convinced that airpower doesn’t grow in a vacuum, and that commanders must acknowledge the contributions of everyone who makes airpower possible. For me, the question becomes “how can we develop leaders who understand everyone’s role, and can create a true team?”

My thanks to those who helped me in this research: Maj “Kemo” Perry, my faculty research advisor, and Maj Bret Rider, who provided me with the raw data collected by a 10-member team which he advised in 1996. Thanks also to two airmen who helped me with the nuts and bolts of conducting my survey: SrA Ashley Grice of the Air War College, and SrA Garlen Rogers of the Senior NCO Academy.



### *Abstract*

In the USAF, the average fighter pilot never supervises enlisted personnel in his first twelve to fifteen years of service. His first direct supervisory role may occur when he becomes an operations officer or, even worse, a squadron commander. Prior to the 1991 “objective wing” reorganization, when a fighter squadron commander led 30 officers and a handful of enlisted, such a late introduction to supervision of enlisted may have had little deleterious effect. However, since the current fighter commander leads an organization of 250-300 personnel, he or she must be ready to lead and create unit cohesion from day one. Unfortunately, current fighter career paths provide few opportunities to learn or practice that type of team-building and leadership.

This research asks, therefore, how rated commanders learn the skills necessary for squadron command. Using a pilot study, interviews, and previously conducted survey research, the project examines the perceptions of recent fighter squadron commanders and senior non-commissioned officers to determine if the Air Force properly prepares rated officers for command. Are commanders trained in the current system successfully building cohesive teams? Further exploring the issue by comparing USAF squadron structure with that of the Marine Corps and Navy, the paper describes how future commanders might be better prepared for leadership roles, and offers practical suggestions to promote leadership development among junior and mid-level fliers.

## Chapter 1

### Introduction

*Pilots never hav[e] been a part of the team in the first place. . . pilots think they “joined the Air Force to fly.”<sup>1</sup>*

*What’s the worth of a mission-support officer vs. a qualified pilot? There isn’t a comparison. . . . The bottom line for the Air Force is bombs on target, on time.<sup>2</sup>*

*Why have we gotten so far away from the team concept?<sup>3</sup>*

—Letters to the Editor, *Air Force Times*

The statements excerpted above are representative of a long-running battle between fliers and non-fliers which has been waged on the letters page of the *Air Force Times*. Since July 1997, at least 27 letters and 2 full-page commentaries have shown pilots at odds with non-pilots over who makes the greater contribution to the Air Force mission. Many Air Force members have seen this battle played out within their own careers; many would agree that such arguments are “a type of divisiveness that can destroy our credibility as an officer corps.”<sup>4</sup> Many would also agree with 2<sup>d</sup> Lt George Sherwood that the Air Force is a team whose members “need to understand each other to effectively accomplish a mission.”<sup>5</sup> If that’s the case, however, then why do so many team members perceive such a lack of understanding? What is the underlying problem?

An outside observer of Air Force culture and history, Rand Corporation analyst Carl H. Builder, suggests one possibility: “the amalgamation which constitutes the current Air

Force lacks that unique sense of identity and shared sense of purpose which are needed to make it a high-performing system.”<sup>6</sup> He highlights the lack of shared purpose and echoes the aforementioned letters by noting the historical “battle between pilots and everyone else in the Air Force over their relative status.”<sup>7</sup> To Builder, the problem stems from flaws in airpower theory; however, he tacitly acknowledges the leadership failures inherent in that battle by citing the management theories of Peter B. Vaill.

This research keys on that leadership problem—the failure, at least in the eyes of some Air Force members, of unit commanders to create that shared sense of purpose. Vaill coined the term “high-performing system” and developed the idea of *purposing*: the actions by which an organization’s formal leadership induces clarity, consensus, and commitment.<sup>8</sup> If the leaders of high-performing systems communicate consensus and commitment—which the Air Force doesn’t seem to be demonstrating in the rated vs. non-rated battle—then Air Force leadership is failing in its task to create a high-performing force.

That’s obviously a bold statement, and a harsh indictment of our system; covering the whole issue in depth is outside the scope of this Air Command and Staff College (ACSC) research project. While a great deal of anecdotal evidence suggests that cohesion is breaking down in the Air Force—witness current trends in officer and enlisted retention<sup>9</sup>—one cannot conclusively prove that the breakdown is due to lack of shared purpose. Therefore, this project will examine the perceptions of Air Force members to see how unit-level leadership impacts unit cohesion, and to ask if the Air Force develops leaders ready to build that cohesion.

This paper will explore the issue of shared purpose by looking at the lowest-level interaction between aviators and non-aviators: the flying squadron. The objective squadron, formed by former USAF Chief of Staff General Merrill McPeak's reorganization in 1991, put pilots and maintainers together in the same unit, thereby challenging commanders—aviators—to develop that sense of shared purpose with those who support them. If commanders can't build a team at the building-block level, it follows that they can't be completely effective leaders at higher levels; conversely, if the foundation is strong, the whole structure should be sound. Therefore, this paper asks what those ground-level players think. Are current leaders building cohesion at the lowest level? If not, why not? Is the Air Force properly preparing its future leaders for command? Is there a better way to prepare them?

This paper will ask those questions to both senior noncommissioned officers and former commanders of objective squadrons. It will include a pilot study of Senior NCO Academy students with fighter squadron experience which will ask if their squadron commanders have effectively led the enlisted force since the institution of the objective wing structure. To compare the opinions of the leaders with the led, it will ask the same questions of former fighter squadron commanders. To lend weight to the pilot study's findings, the paper will cite an AY 1996 ACSC research project, "Leadership Development in the Objective Squadron," and an AY 1995 Air War College project, "The Objective Wing." In sum, these primary and secondary sources will show that while the squadron leadership development system isn't broken, it's in need of some fine tuning.

After establishing why the Air Force should modify its current system, this project will suggest how. Using face-to-face interviews with survey respondents and Navy and

Marine Corps aviators, it will compare the USMC/USN-style squadron to the USAF, to ask whether that structure better promotes the exercise of leadership skills. Ultimately, the paper will demonstrate how reassigning rated officers within fighter squadrons should create better commanders, and offer practical steps to promote leadership development in aviators.

### Notes

<sup>1</sup> Capt Stephanie Beard, "Letters to the Editor," *Air Force Times* 58, no. 4 (1 Sep 97): 20.

<sup>2</sup> Maj Steven Curley, "Letters to the Editor," *Air Force Times* 58, no. 5 (8 Sep 97): 28.

<sup>3</sup> 2<sup>d</sup> Lt George Sherwood, "Letters to the Editor," *Air Force Times* 58, no. 12 (27 Oct 97): 30.

<sup>4</sup> 2<sup>d</sup> Lt Anthony Carr, "Letters to the Editor," *Air Force Times* 58, no. 8 (29 Sep 97): 30.

<sup>5</sup> Sherwood, 30.

<sup>6</sup> Carl H. Builder, *The Icarus Syndrome*, (New Brunswick, N.J.: Transaction Publishers, 1993), 221.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid., 215.

<sup>8</sup> Peter B. Vaill, *Managing as a Performing Art*, (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1989), 52.

<sup>9</sup> See, for example, Bryant Jordan, "Still Punching Out," *Air Force Times* 58, no. 31 (9 March 1998): 3, and John Pulley, "Running On Empty," *Air Force Times* 58, no. 32 (16 March 1998): 3.

## Chapter 2

### Is there a problem?

*[We're] giving the flying squadron commander much wider scope—a much tougher set of responsibilities.<sup>1</sup>*

—Gen Merrill A. McPeak

*Continuing to identify the very best future commanders and then providing focused training remain very important.<sup>2</sup>*

—Gen Ronald R. Fogleman

*[Squadron commanders] don't get experience early enough. It's like getting the general manager's job at Denny's because you ate there once.<sup>3</sup>*

—Former squadron commander

From the above comments, there appears to be a disconnect between senior leadership's desire to identify and prepare future commanders and those very commanders' perceptions of how they were prepared. It follows that if commanders are not well-prepared upon assuming command, they cannot be completely effective as leaders and team builders. But does this disconnect exist? Does the Air Force prepare its leaders, as General Fogleman suggests, or does it leave it up to young officers to prepare themselves?

The answer can be found among two populations: those who have recently led at squadron level, and those who have been led. Accordingly, this researcher conducted a survey of current Air War College (AWC) students with command experience to ask how

well they performed as commanders and how well the Air Force prepared them for the task. Then, to counterbalance the commanders' impressions of themselves with the perceptions of some highly experienced enlisted personnel, the same questions were posed to students at the Senior Noncommissioned Officer Academy (SNCOA). Comparing the answers should determine whether or not those commanders succeeded in building cohesion, and if they were adequately prepared for their command tasks.

## **Pilot Study**

### **Methodology**

The surveys located at Appendix A were administered to AWC students and faculty and SNCOA students in December, 1997. Eleven former commanders and fourteen NCOs responded. The limited sample size stemmed from Air University policies on survey approval and the small target populations at each school. Because of that limited size, the survey served as a pilot study to gauge the target populations' opinions and provided a vector for further research.

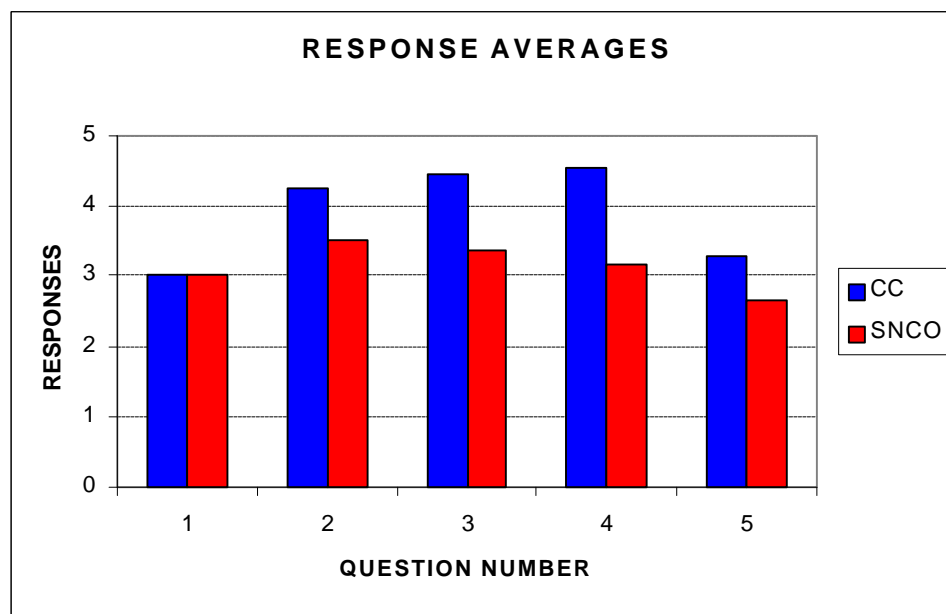
The survey asked respondents to indicate their agreement or disagreement with the following statements, using a five-point Likert scale:

1. As a commander, I was (my commanders have been) knowledgeable about enlisted issues.
2. As a commander, I (my commanders have) responded effectively to enlisted concerns.
3. As a commander, I (my commanders have) fostered effective enlisted/officer cooperation.
4. As a commander, I (my commanders have) developed cohesive ops/maintenance teamwork.
5. The Air Force adequately prepares rated officers to be effective leaders and commanders.

The survey also asked participants to consider personal interviews. Three AWC students, one AWC faculty member, and two SNCOA students consented; their comments illuminated the raw survey data and pinpointed the causes of the problems they perceived.

## Results

Figure 1 graphically portrays the survey results from all 25 respondents. The question numbers along the x-axis refer to the list above; the left-hand bar for each question shows commander (CC) responses, and the right-hand bar shows senior NCO attitudes. When comparing the numerical averages for each statement, low values along the y-axis indicate disagreement, “3” indicates neutrality, and high values indicate agreement.



**Figure 1. Survey Responses.**

Question 1 shows the only agreement between the two populations: they’re neutral—a perfect 3.0—on commander knowledge. That’s also the only area in which



commanders failed to give themselves a positive score. One respondent who considered himself knowledgeable qualified his response with “somewhat.” This neutral response suggests commanders don’t consider themselves ready to manage the enlisted force when they assume command.

Interview comments from respondents clarified the enlisted attitudes on the question. MSgt Cammie Gray, a maintainer with fighter and airlift experience, flatly stated that “the Air Force doesn’t prepare any officer—especially rated ones—for enlisted issues. Officers don’t understand their impact on enlisted careers. They don’t know about EPRs, indorsements, awards, anything.” He noted that his SNCOA flight discussed the fact that rated commanders don’t get properly trained to command, and suggested that officers should be more familiar with enlisted PME. Conversely, SMSgt Terry Liddick, a career-long fighter maintainer who’s currently a flight superintendent in the 389 FS at Mountain Home, argued that “dealing with enlisted is not a drawback of the current system; my commanders have done OK.” He had concerns, however, which will be covered below.

In question 2, commanders said they responded well to enlisted concerns by scoring themselves a 4.27 average. One respondent gave himself a 5 but noted it was “thanks to a great section commander, first shirt, and chief.” Lt Col Dave Brown, former commander of the 82d Aerial Target Squadron, noted that “people problems were a real eye-opener—20 minutes after assuming command, I was dealing with a case of spousal abuse,” but felt he had given people issues and troop concerns their due. No one confessed any difficulties here; only one respondent circled “3,” noting that “my troops would have to tell you this.” The senior NCOs weren’t quite as complimentary, but they did give their leaders a positive 3.5 score. In general, NCO comments suggested that

although rated commanders had a limited knowledge base to work from, they did focus their efforts in the proper areas.

Question 3 focused on enlisted/officer cooperation. Continuing the trend, former commanders considered themselves effective at facilitating that cooperation, averaging 4.45. One respondent who scored a “5” admitted he “worked his [rear] off on this issue . . . it was very hard to do,” while another “5” commented simply, “I hope.” The enlisted respondents gave their bosses a passing score of 3.36. Sergeant Liddick opined that “this area has gotten better in the last six years—the newer guys are doing it better,” suggesting that through the familiarity created by the objective squadron structure, officers and enlisted are coming to understand each other.

Question 4, however, demonstrated the largest gap between officer and enlisted opinions. Commanders thought they had created cohesive ops/maintenance teams, giving themselves the survey’s highest score: a 4.55, or “strongly agree,” average. The NCOs, on the other hand, scored “ops/maintenance cohesion” one and one-half points lower, at a barely neutral 3.14. Sergeant Liddick, who was generally positive about the objective squadron throughout his interview, stated clearly that commanders’ unfamiliarity with maintenance issues and requirements led to bad decisions which widened the ops-maintenance rift. Sergeant Gray laid it further on the line: “The system doesn’t work. The Ops commander runs things but doesn’t understand the maintenance nitty-gritty.”

Wrapping the survey up, question 5 asked whether “the Air Force adequately prepares rated officers to be effective leaders;” the neutral-to-negative responses suggest that it does not. Commanders thought by a slim margin—3.27, just above neutral—that it did, but even those who answered “yes” (4 or 5) conceded that it happened by chance.

Colonel Brown argued that “it works by default—we have good leaders,” but admitted that much development “happens by osmosis. There’s no preplanning.” Lt Col Mark Morris, former 59 FS/CC, echoed that “we’re obviously doing something right—but we should have a better way to pass along lessons learned.” Others refused to give the system the benefit of the doubt. Col “Slats” Slaton, former F-15E commander, said “I had nothing but a seven-day USAFE orientation course, and I’m not sure that’s sufficient. I had the briefing, but no experience.” Lt Col “Zip” Duda, formerly of the 347 OSS, said “the system is not designed to develop leaders. Becoming a great leader, like becoming a great pilot, depends on self-study.” With such comments coming from the very commanders the system produced—commanders who generally believed they’d done a great job—it’s no wonder the senior enlisted respondents thought the system needed work. The NCOs gave statement 5 the only sub-neutral score on the survey, at 2.64.

To recap the primary-source research, then, the pilot study suggests that rated officers are not well prepared to assume command. Contrasting enlisted attitudes with commander attitudes, one finds that while squadron commanders devote considerable energy to enlisted concerns, they only generically understand basic enlisted issues, and—at least according to maintainers—don’t have an adequate grasp of the technical maintenance issues which they control. However, as previously noted, the study’s sample size was only 25; more evidence is needed to determine if a systemic problem exists. Fortunately, such evidence is available from previous Air University research.

### **Results of Previous Research**

In 1995, Lt Col Walter L. Burns submitted a research project to Air War College entitled “The Objective Wing: A Critical Analysis.” For his report, Colonel Burns

distributed 400 surveys to AWC and ACSC students asking 25 detailed questions about the conversion to the objective wing structure; 140 people responded. The level of response provided a 99.5% confidence level that the data was 90% accurate—or, in other words, that the survey “accurately portray[ed] the perceptions of respondents with a 10 percent margin of error.”<sup>4</sup>

While Burns’s survey dealt with a number of objective wing topics, it specifically asked respondents whether or not they agreed with the statement “Objective Wing squadron commanders are adequately trained.” Echoing this researcher’s data, Colonel Burns noted that his respondents clearly felt “squadron commanders were not adequately prepared for the task.”<sup>5</sup> In fact, that statement received the second-lowest score of his entire survey—a 2.64; field grade maintainers scored it even lower, at 2.06 (using an identical scale to the previously described pilot study). Colonel Burns concluded that his respondents felt that “commanders were not prepared to handle the two-edged demands of operations and maintenance and the proper care and feeding of the enlisted force,” and furthermore, that “these scores are strong indicators something is wrong with the way we train officers to become squadron commanders in an objective wing structure.”<sup>6</sup>

“The Objective Wing” included narrative comments from survey respondents and from the author that further reinforce the notion that the Air Force doesn’t have an adequate system to develop commanders. One respondent, a former commander, noted that “I had never dealt with enlisted issues my entire 18-year career and overnight I was responsible for 300 of them.” Colonel Burns himself confessed to “ignorance [and] inexperience,” admitting that “I certainly was not trained for the job beforehand even though I had attended the obligatory squadron commander’s course....The bottom line is

the objective wing demands operations squadron commanders [who] possess skills that current career paths and training opportunities fail to provide.”<sup>7</sup>

Using much of Burns’s work as a starting point, an ACSC research team further explored the issue of leadership development in the objective wing structure. In “Leadership Development in the Objective Squadron,” a 10-member student group (Maj James D. Dodson, et al.) conducted a series of focus groups and leadership forums with 73 prior objective squadron commanders, operations officers, and maintenance officers. Portions of the research dealt directly with the leadership experiences of the 40 participating former commanders. For that commander-specific experience, the authors claim an 85 percent confidence level, plus or minus 10 percent.<sup>8</sup>

In their introduction, the authors state their central findings:

The objective squadron has experienced a remarkable and seemingly contradictory combination of results. This research indicates that although squadron commanders feel the combat effectiveness and deployability of flying squadrons has improved, they did not feel prepared to lead in a *majority* of instances [emphasis in original]. Deficient commander preparation, both in experience and academically, also adversely affects maintenance supervision in the objective squadron.

Despite the apparent benefits of the objective squadron, the Air Force falls well short of its usual standards in leadership development of its rated officers and squadron commanders. . . . Assuming command of a flying squadron with 15 to 17 years of service, an officer would appear to have plenty of time to prepare, yet such preparation is eluding the Air Force.<sup>9</sup>

Fleshing out their assertions, the authors summarized their findings into four main conclusions, the last three of which directly support the current research.

1. The objective squadron is more mission capable and deployable.
2. The objective squadron adversely affects maintenance effectiveness and supervision.
3. Squadron commanders do not feel prepared to lead the objective squadron.
4. The Air Force does a poor job preparing officers for command.<sup>10</sup>

Their survey indicated that 60 percent of the squadron commanders felt inadequately prepared for their role, and described how young aviators have few opportunities to develop leadership skills: “at no point in the typical career flow does the officer gain experience beyond leading other rated officers.”<sup>11</sup> Participants admitted to insufficient maintenance knowledge, noting that their “steep learning curve often prevented them from effectively commanding that part of the squadron which makes up the majority of personnel.”<sup>12</sup> Finally, over 70 percent of the participating commanders “felt that the Air Force does a poor job developing leaders....Typical negative answers were ‘terrible,’ ‘totally inadequate,’ and ‘absolutely not,’ and often included emphatic gestures and gripping explanations....A significant number of commanders remarked that other US military services do a much better job developing leaders.”<sup>13</sup> Transcripts of the leadership forums detail that, quite simply, there have been too few opportunities for aviators to lead on the ground.

The maintenance officers who participated in the Dodson, et al. survey highlighted the impact of this inadequate preparation. Sixty percent agreed that the Air Force is failing to properly develop its future leaders. They contrasted their own career field, wherein officers lead and supervise from day one, with the “minimal leadership opportunities during the formative years of [aviators’] careers.”<sup>14</sup> And they decried the results, remarking that “many commanders were extremely concerned with the bottom line, but were unable to lead the troops to achieve the desired results. They lack the people skills essential to effective command.”<sup>15</sup> Clearly, these respondents would agree with Colonel Burns’s earlier assertion that commanders need skills which the system is failing to provide.

## Summary

The data cited in this chapter belie General Fogleman's contention that identification and training of future commanders has received adequate attention from Air Force senior leadership. All three projects used former objective squadron commanders as primary sources; all three indicate a need to improve the way the Air Force prepares its future leaders. Burns and Dodson, et al. included maintenance officers, who overwhelmingly disparaged their squadron commanders' effectiveness as team builders. Finally, this year's pilot study surveyed the senior enlisted force—who downgraded their recent commanders and echoed the earlier two studies' findings, strongly suggesting the Air Force team lacks cohesion at squadron level. Without a doubt, something has to change if the Air Force is to develop commanders who can build teams effective enough to meet the multifaceted challenges facing the post-drawdown expeditionary Air Force.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Gen Merrill A. McPeak, *Selected Works, 1990-1994*, (Maxwell AFB, Ala.: AU Press, 1995), 105.

<sup>2</sup> Gen Ronald R. Fogleman, "Open Letter to Air Force General Officers," 1 Feb 95; cited in Lt Col Walter L. Burns, "The Objective Wing: A Critical Analysis," (Maxwell AFB, Ala.: Air War College, 1995), 13.

<sup>3</sup> Former commander survey response to Maj James D. Dodson, et al., "Leadership Development in the Objective Squadron," (Maxwell AFB, Ala.: ACSC, 1996). Maj Bret Rider, faculty advisor for the project, provided the raw data from project surveys, interviews, and focus groups on condition of respondent anonymity.

<sup>4</sup> Burns, 9.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid., 13.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid., 21.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid., 21-22.

<sup>8</sup> Dodson, et al., 23.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid., 1-2.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid., 37.

## Notes

<sup>11</sup> Ibid., 46. The authors characterize this fact with General McPeak's words: "Not much of a leadership challenge here."

<sup>12</sup> Ibid., 47.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid., 50.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid., 56.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid.



## Chapter 3

### The solution: a paradigm shift

*The Air Force should admit “it’s an ugly baby and I’m the father.”*

—An Air Force colonel<sup>1</sup>

According to Maj Gen Perry M. Smith, the effective leader who discovers a problem patiently gathers information to determine possible solutions. He should always look for contrasting views, then decide how to act and take risks where necessary.<sup>2</sup> In this vein, this research shall explore potential solutions to the problem of leadership development as suggested in the pilot study and supporting data. If new fighter squadron commanders are unprepared because they don’t understand technical aspects of maintenance, they don’t understand enlisted issues, and they have precious few opportunities to practice the skills they need to be leaders, then one answer seems obvious: give young aviators a chance to learn what they need to know and to practice leadership. But is this achievable in today’s Air Force?

Logically, leadership development should start as early as possible. However, the current squadron structure focuses low-ranking aircrew on developing technical skills over leadership skills—and a number of aviators believe that that’s proper. Interview comments from the Dodson, et al. study show a majority of commanders asserting that aviators are fliers first and officers second. Without question, aviators have to master

their weapon systems. Is there room to achieve technical mastery, and leadership skill as well?

This research will argue that both are possible. However, to overcome the flier-first mentality, the Air Force will have to undergo a sea change in its institutional mindset. To explore how, this chapter will examine the barriers to and impetus for change, and will contrast the Air Force's squadron model with those of the Marine Corps and Navy.

### **Barriers to Change**

A number of factors combine to create an inertia which works against radical change in the way the Air Force nurtures its aviators; one is the "flier first" mentality highlighted above. Comments from the Dodson, et al. group's transcripts indicate how many aviators emphasize flying above all else. One commander noted that if the "job is to be mission-ready, then flying should take priority. Flying demands are so high that you can't afford to dilute responsibilities with non-flying duties." Two others argued that 90 to 95 percent of an aircrew's early efforts had to concentrate on the technical part of flying. Still another former commander rationalized the situation, saying, "Company grade officers should be pilots first....We need to remember the goal is to fly, fight, and win. There is nothing wrong with enjoying your specialty!"

The "flier first" mindset appears to feed into a desire to maintain the status quo—at least in terms of keeping young aircrews focused solely on flying. When asked directly whether or not the operational squadron should be realigned to give rated officers maintenance experience early in their careers, Dodson et al.'s respondents were evenly split.<sup>3</sup> Naysayers' transcript comments such as "it would be difficult to manage," "could detract from capability to be mission ready," "only one or two operators need to know

about maintenance,” and “this would be too hard to do, but should definitely be studied” demonstrate how comfort with the familiar provides disincentives for productive change. One respondent wrapped all his reasons for sticking with the current system into one comment: “We can’t change it much. Being a fighter pilot is too technical, \$100 million of equipment is a lot of responsibility, the opportunities aren’t there.”

Significantly, a number of the commanders who argued against putting fliers into the maintenance structure were concerned primarily with increased operations tempo and limited manning. “Though they believed the operators would definitely benefit from such a program, the cost is [sic] simply too high. [One respondent noted that] ‘operators must remain focused on flying and rely on normal day-to-day interaction with maintenance to learn what they need to know.’”<sup>4</sup> An O-6 participant in the research complained simply, “it would be good to give pilots this kind of experience if we had the personnel resources, but I don’t think we can afford the people.”<sup>5</sup>

To be sure, overcoming the inertia described by Dodson’s respondents will present a major challenge. The current optempo and drawdown manning levels represent particularly vexing problems. To achieve the success this research envisions—to give new duties to frequent deployers in undermanned units—would require commitment and buy-in at the ground level. Can that buy-in be achieved?

## **Seeds of Change**

All the interview data from the recent pilot study indicate that the answer is yes: aviator attitudes are changing. In contrast with the comments cited above, this year’s participants argued that aircrew cannot rely on day-to-day chats with crew chiefs to gain the understanding needed for squadron command. Each of them—all from a presumably

“pilot first” fighter background—insisted that the system has to provide more opportunities for rated officers to learn “the maintenance side of the house.” Colonel Slaton stated “the biggest limitation is the lack of maintenance understanding, and the right time to learn is not upon assuming command.” Lt Col Brown wished he “ha[d] been a maintenance officer. Ops issues were second nature, but on maintenance, I was completely clueless. That background would have helped off the bat.” Lt Col Duda said bluntly, “it’s a great idea to put fliers in maintenance.” These ideas lend credence to a prediction made by one of Dodson, et al.’s O-6 respondents: “Now that the squadron commander must lead maintainers, officers [who think] they might become commanders will probably take a greater interest in learning how to lead maintainers.”<sup>6</sup>

Some commanders have already taken the process a step further, experimenting with greater integration of squadron functions. In his 1995 project, Lt Col Walter Burns described organizing the administrative and operations data management functions of his squadron into an operations support flight, under a flight commander. He judged that it “passed the common sense test,” and reported that feedback from his bosses “all the way up to the AETC commander” was positive. He further argued that feedback from the troops under the new flight was “overwhelmingly supportive;” then admitted that “unfortunately, I could never get official approval to implement the change so I had to organize ‘under the table’ with most of my bosses just not asking any questions.”<sup>7</sup> In this year’s survey, Lt Col Mark Morris reported that he partially integrated operations scheduling and weapons in the 59<sup>th</sup> Fighter Squadron. He put one maintenance troop in scheduling, and two in the weapons shop, and “it worked like a champ. The officers were really impressed at how sharp those guys were.”

One particular comment from this year's survey suggests that these attitude shifts are large enough to engender a move toward greater squadron integration. "Zip" Duda points out that "the dream progression for a fighter guy is deficient. Everyone wants to go weapons [shop, as an additional duty] to weapons to weapons to Stan/Eval to weapons to flight commander to ADO—but your entire focus as a commander can't be ops. [Junior aircrew] should look at the things bad-mouthed a lot, like Life Support, where they can supervise eight or nine enlisted in a low-threat environment."

Data from the 1996 leadership survey support this greater emphasis on hands-on supervision. One former commander remarked that he had had two banked [assigned non-flying duties while awaiting follow-on training] pilots who "learned more about leadership in one year than normal pilots do in many years."<sup>8</sup> Turning to their own personal experiences, "[m]any commanders cited traditionally less glamorous functional areas as the most valuable source of their practical knowledge about maintenance and enlisted issues. Squadron safety officer, maintenance liaison officer, functional check flight pilots, and working in the wing inspection or exercise evaluation office [positions providing experience with enlisted career paths, EPRs, and a wide scope of coordination with base organizations] were all mentioned several times."<sup>9</sup> Clearly, parts of the "flier first" mentality are giving way to an "officer first" ideal.

Even so, the Air Force needs a better model for providing this hands-on experience, because such opportunities have yet to materialize for the average aviator; interview comments from both ACSC projects point the way to that model. In Dodson, et al., "a significant number of commanders remarked that other US military services do a much better job of developing leaders."<sup>10</sup> Two former commanders believed that the Army did

a far better job at instilling responsibility in its leaders; another volunteered that he liked “the way the Navy did things.”<sup>11</sup> This year, Lt Col Morris echoed comments made by Gen McPeak when the Air Force restructured: “Most people said the reorganization wouldn’t work, but fighter interceptor squadrons operated with the same idea; the Navy and Marine Corps have for years....If you want to put pilots into the chain, look at the Navy or Marine model.”<sup>12</sup>

### **The Navy/Marine Model**

What is that squadron model, and how does it facilitate leadership development in junior officers? Lt Col Mark Barnhart, former commander of VMFA(AW)-242—an F/A–18 squadron—and senior Marine on the ACSC faculty, describes the typical squadron as functionally aligned. All activities required to generate, fly, and recover a sortie are divided among six departments, each headed by an aircrew. The S-1 through S-4 departments correspond to the standard service-wide staff functions; the S-5 is the department of Safety and Standardization, which oversees processes that the Air Force divides among the Ground Safety, Flight Safety, and Stan/Eval shops. Finally, the maintenance department divides the sortie-generation requirements among seven divisions (depicted in Appendix B).<sup>13</sup>

While the S-1 through S-5 departments incorporate a few more direct supervisory duties than do their Air Force counterparts, in essence the two systems are similar. On the other hand, the Marines organize maintenance leadership quite differently—and, in contrast with the Air Force, provide far more opportunities for aviators to lead on the ground. A rated major leads the department as Aircraft Maintenance Officer (AMO), and the assistant AMO (an O-3) can be aircrew as well; an E-8/E-9 maintenance chief assists

the two. Furthermore, five of the seven maintenance divisions are usually led by O-2 or O-3 fliers, who handle their supervisory functions under the tutelage of an E-7. Such close enlisted-officer relationships provide a foundation for leadership which the Air Force misses. According to Marine Lt Col Dave Kuehn, “you learn everything you need to know from your gunny.”<sup>14</sup>

To be sure, greater interaction doesn’t have to translate into greater leadership skills. Does the Marine structure really develop those skills, and is the extra aircrew workload worth the effort? Colonel Barnhart concedes that “writing [performance reports], etc.—it’s a burden, because there’s no reduction in flying. But that’s where they learn leadership—how to nurture and build a team. It’s really a reward to go to maintenance, because that’s where the rubber meets the road, where you personally motivate the troops. Honestly, all the other S-department [fliers] want to be there, and that’s where you put your best guys.” Explaining further, he describes how his own experience as AMO prepared him for command: “I knew every troop in the squadron, and got a lot of dividends.” Finally, the colonel highlights the value the Marine Corps puts on ground leadership skills: “it’s not official policy, but [a Marine aviator] can’t command if he’s an ‘ops weenie’ [i.e., never worked in maintenance]. Ops weenies tend to be myopic; leadership experience comes from maintenance time. In fact, my XO [deputy] command screened, but didn’t get a squadron. He was told off-line it was because he had no maintenance experience.”

Speaking for the Navy, Lieutenant Commander Pete Nette of VQ-5 (an ES-3 squadron) and ACSC’s seminar 14 describes a model that mirrors the structure and leadership progression illuminated by Colonel Barnhart. Significantly, he echoes

Barnhart's comments about the value of leading the enlisted maintainers. "Pilots [whine] about the work, but it's essential. It definitely builds leadership earlier. Right off the bat, you're dealing with 20-year-olds with family problems and learning how maintenance supports ops. Your [performance reports], in fact, are based on how well you lead in your ground job—not how well you drop bombs."<sup>15</sup>

That last statement probably marks a line across which no current Air Force flier would step. All the aviators interviewed this year and by Dodson, et al. in 1996 unanimously insist that credibility in the air is as vital as ground leadership—since, in General McPeak's words, "the mission of the Air Force is to fly and fight, and...the flying squadron commander is the team quarterback for that mission."<sup>16</sup> In fact, one former commander worries more "that we don't eliminate weak fliers" than about developing leadership skills.<sup>17</sup> As argued above, however, most of these "barrier" attitudes are changing, and current commanders admit the Air Force must better prepare its future leaders. The Navy/Marine model provides one format for such preparation. The task, then, is to practically apply that model to the Air Force squadron structure.

### Notes

<sup>1</sup> Senior leaders address the ACSC student body on a non-attribution basis.

<sup>2</sup> Perry M. Smith, *Taking Charge*, (Washington, D.C.: National Defense University Press, 1986), 12-13.

<sup>3</sup> Dodson, et al., 51.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid., 52.

<sup>5</sup> Quoted from Dodson, et al. interview transcripts.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

<sup>7</sup> Burns, 20.

<sup>8</sup> Dodson, et al., interview transcripts.

<sup>9</sup> Dodson, et al., 69.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid., 50.

<sup>11</sup> Dodson, et al. interview transcripts.

<sup>12</sup> See General Merrill A Peak, "Tomorrow's Air Force," in *Selected Works 1990-1994*, (Maxwell AFB, Ala.: Air University Press, 1995), 109.



## Notes

- <sup>13</sup> Lt Col Mark S. Barnhart, interviewed by author, 3 February 1998.
- <sup>14</sup> Lt Col Dave Kuehn, interviewed by author, 16 January 1998.
- <sup>15</sup> LCDR Pete Nette, interviewed by author, 13 February 1998.
- <sup>16</sup> McPeak, “Organize, Train, and Equip,” *Selected Works 1990-1994*, 54.
- <sup>17</sup> Dodson, et al. interview transcripts.

## Chapter 4

### Recommendations

*When you see a [problem], you can do one of two things: wring your hands, or look for a shovel. Be shovelers!*

—An Air Force general officer

*The mechanism to fix this is in place. We just don't use it.*

—Lt Col Mark Morris

Using the words of a number of flying and support personnel across all the Services—and concentrating heavily on the experiences of former fighter squadron commanders—the two previous chapters have argued that the Air Force needs to provide more and better leadership training opportunities for aviators. As an institution, the Air Force must prepare future leaders to build the cohesion that will create a sense of shared purpose at unit level. Specifically, this paper contends that potential commanders need more familiarity with enlisted issues and problems, broader understanding of technical maintenance processes, and, above all, hands-on practice as supervisors. The Navy and Marine Corps provide those by using aviators in direct supervisory roles from very early in their officers' careers. Can the Air Force do the same within an objective wing's fighter squadron? How?

Dodson, et al. provided one possibility—further reorganization. The authors argued persuasively for a redesigned, completely functionally integrated squadron.<sup>1</sup> However,

current optempo and manning problems don't provide much opportunity for another major shift, and Air Force senior leaders don't seem inclined to push for more reorganization. General Fogleman believed the objective wing structure is "generally working well, but there is a need for fine-tuning adjustments."<sup>2</sup> Therefore, the opportunity exists to make constructive change within today's structure. The following recommendations will provide the fine tuning General Fogleman sought.

## **Practical Solutions**

### **Just do it**

All this year's interviewees suggested ways to get aviators involved in hands-on leadership roles; the NCOs argued most directly and forcefully for change. MSgt Gray recommended that fliers should "command a flight line flight—but keep 'em flying at the same time." SMSgt Liddick explained in more detail. "As I've suggested many times, [an aircrew] additional duty should be sortie generation flight commander as a captain. A senior captain could handle that and fly; it's no more tasking than what the flying schedulers currently do. [Such duty] would teach the familiarity required to balance maintenance and ops issues. Granted, this would take some opportunities away from maintenance officers, but so what? It would make effective leaders—and I want effectiveness."

The former commanders agreed that fliers should take leadership roles within the current structure. Col Slaton expanded on the NCOs' idea of using flight commander positions, saying "take senior captains, and make them RPI-6s [a reduced level of flying readiness]." Lt Col Morris agreed, but like Sergeant Liddick, thought the fliers involved

could stay at RPI-1 mission-ready status [fully capable to perform all squadron missions]. Lt Col Duda wanted fliers directly involved with the troops at “as low a level as possible.” One of Dodson, et al.’s respondents summed up the potential benefits: “We absolutely need this. On the flight line, the officer gains NCO/enlisted leadership experience as well as maintenance knowledge.”<sup>3</sup>

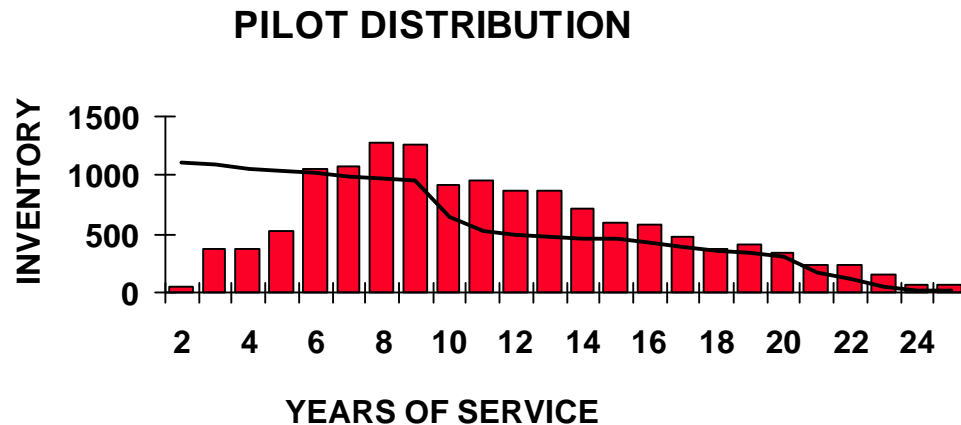
Finally, the former commanders suggested more ways for using the current structure to promote leadership development. Lt Col Brown proposed making a “graduate” operations flight commander the assistant squadron maintenance officer (SMO). He also suggested the complete integration of the ops and maintenance weapons shops, noting that “the NCOIC will teach the officers how to get the job done.” Lt Col Morris agreed, and further recommended integration of all scheduling functions under an aviator. Lt Col Duda threw in a similar recommendation for the Plans and Mobility functions—noting that many squadrons have already integrated those—and pointed out that operations support squadrons provide fliers even more opportunities for direct supervision.

To sum up, the Air Force can better use the existing structure by putting rated officers into direct supervisory positions. Current commanders should create leadership opportunities by melding functions like weapons and scheduling into single shops. More importantly, they should put fliers directly into maintenance roles like sortie generation flight commander and assistant SMO, while keeping career maintainers as assistant flight commanders and SMOs. Their expertise will prove indispensable as aviators take on new leadership responsibilities. Of course, some officers will disagree with the whole idea, arguing (as did half of Dodson’s respondents) that fliers have to stay focused on the cockpit. Indeed, even those who want fliers’ duties to expand caution that one’s “ops

background has to be rock solid. Without that, a commander can never catch up.”<sup>4</sup> The trick, then, is to test these recommendations carefully and safely by using officers who already have adequate operations experience. Given the manning concerns voiced by former commanders, can fliers assume new duties?

### Use the “bathtub”

The demographics of the current rated force provide just such an opportunity to test aviators’ ability to fill these roles. All respondents and interviewees suggested using senior captains and majors in leadership positions; current squadron manning figures depict a large quantity of captains and majors in line positions. Figure 2, the Air Force Personnel Center’s (AFPC) portrayal of current pilot manning levels, shows this overabundance of flying experience among line aviators.<sup>5</sup>



**Figure 2. Pilot Inventory By Years Of Service**

The key to this chart is the central “objective force line,” which shows AFPC’s *desired* experience level throughout the inventory. Obviously, as the chart indicates, personnel managers want a force that depends on inexperienced fliers to do the majority of the flying; more senior fliers are expected to move into command and staff positions.

However, the blank space on the left side of the chart—nicknamed “the bathtub” by AFPC officials—shows a force with far too few young officers to fill the demand. To ensure that all required flying billets are filled, personnel managers must use the overage of fliers with 8-18 years of service—the amount above and to the right of the line—to fill lieutenant and captain positions.

This presents a leadership challenge in itself, as all of these more-senior fliers look for career advancement where the current structure creates a bottleneck. Absent new job opportunities, squadrons could see lieutenant colonels as flight commanders and majors as shop chiefs—or end up with four or five assistant operations officers. Instead of allowing this to occur, commanders should move the best rated officers into maintenance supervision. Not only would this prevent career stagnation in those officers, it would provide them the proper foundation for command. Equally important, it would provide a controlled experiment to determine how many maintenance functions can be led by fliers. The economies of scale provided by the return to 24-aircraft fighter squadrons as mandated by the Quadrennial Defense Review should provide enough additional manpower to allow such a worthwhile expansion of non-flying duties.<sup>6</sup>

### **Improve current commander training**

The recommendations outlined above would take two to four years to bear fruit. Looking for immediate impact, a number of former commanders suggested ways to more aggressively prepare new commanders who lack maintenance/enlisted leadership experience. First, they demanded improvements in squadron commander orientation courses. Lt Col Morris suggested limiting the first week of orientation to aviators only, because they had so much to learn; representatives from other career fields would join

afterwards. Col Slaton recommended expansion of the current course to include senior enlisted perspectives, conceding “the mechanics would be difficult, but you have to learn what first sergeants and chiefs can do. [My orientation] left me wanting more.”

Second, the former commanders said attending the Senior Leaders’ Maintenance Course (SLMC) should be mandatory *before* assuming command. Lt Col Mark Morris was canceled from the course three times; Lt Col Dave Brown was never allowed to go—and both said the lack of experience made their first six months of on-the-job training difficult. Col Slaton provided a work-around, proposing that new operations officers go to the course to better understand both their current and future jobs. Colonel Brown summarized the need for structured preparation thus: “At least three months should be dedicated to preparation and formal training for those slated for command. You’ve got to polish your personal skills, maintain your flying credibility, and you need the SLMC for maintenance credibility.”

These recommendations will fill the needs described in chapters two and three. By providing these training and leadership practice opportunities to near- and mid-term future commanders, the Air Force can develop rated leaders who understand both the enlisted force and the technical maintenance issues inherent in squadron command. However, the recommendations also raise questions outside the scope of this project. To fully cover all aspects of commander preparation will require further study.

## **Implications for Further Research**

### **Ask the NCOs**

All the research cited on the objective squadron's effectiveness has canvassed the field-grade population; the current research is the first to ask noncommissioned officers—the resource often called the “backbone” of the military—how they feel about the subject. However, the Air University survey approval process and the Senior NCO Academy schedule combined to restrict the sample size available. To ensure the NCO attitudes described herein are valid, a statistically valid survey must be conducted. Additionally, interviews and focus groups could tap into NCOs' experience, asking for their ideas on how to teach aviators to lead and how to seamlessly integrate the ops-maintenance team. Almost every Army or Marine officer has an anecdote about how a senior NCO mentored him; the Air Force can tap the same vein.

### **Examine the safety statistics**

Former commanders who oppose giving additional duties to fliers often cite the technical demands of flying. To answer their concerns, safety researchers should compare USAF, USN, and USMC mishap data. If Navy and Marine mishap statistics are worse, the data must be examined demographically to determine if the increase is due to service-specific aspects like carrier qualifications or to the greater non-flying demands on young Navy and Marine aviators. Armed with such information, airmen can use tools like Operational Risk Management to reduce risk factors. Safety data will also help answer whether fliers in supervisory positions should maintain mission-ready RPI-1 status or fly at RPI-6 level.



### **Clearly define the maintenance officer career path**

Many of the respondents to the three surveys cited herein—with views both for and against aviators in maintenance—cited the problem of maintenance officer career progression. Col Slaton lamented how “our system stovepipes people,” and qualified his recommendation for change by saying “but logisticians will ask ‘how do we progress?’” Lt Col Walter Burns highlighted a problem of divided loyalties, wherein SMOs worked for the operations group commander but depended on the logistics group commander for career advice and therefore “did not feel like part of the operations team.”<sup>7</sup> One career maintainer, speaking to Dodson, et al., rationalized the problem as “a cost of doing business.”<sup>8</sup>

The problem dates to 1991—an early after-action report from the 86<sup>th</sup> Wing at Ramstein requested “Air Staff/MAJCOM level of involvement”<sup>9</sup> to solve it—and the solutions suggested for this seven-year-old problem are wide-ranging. Maj Steve Purtle, former SMO and logistics support squadron commander, wants all maintenance functions to come under the operations group commander, who could then tend to the careers of all a wing’s maintainers.<sup>10</sup> On the other hand, Dodson, et al. argue that “it may be a moot point [. . . due to] the current initiative for a generic logistician career specialty [requiring] field graders who have had at least two different logistics jobs as a company grader.”<sup>11</sup> Along those lines, this researcher proposes that career logisticians start as an assistant flight commander in squadron maintenance to get both leadership experience and an understanding of operations, move into the logistics group for career broadening, then return for a required tour as a SMO. In any case, the maintenance career question far exceeds the bounds of this project, and must be left to researchers with logistics and maintenance expertise. Any move designed to more effectively build a team—like the

suggestion to increase fliers' involvement in non-flying issues—must not in itself disenfranchise part of the team.

The Air Force, then, can use the existing squadron set-up to better develop its future commanders, and current experience levels in line squadrons provide a perfect opportunity to test the concept. By merging functions like scheduling, and moving into maintenance leadership positions, fliers can practice leadership skills in ways presently unavailable. Such a move requires the buy-in of everyone involved, however, so safety must be emphasized; more importantly, officer and NCO maintainers must have significant input in the change. They will make or break the experiment.

### Notes

<sup>1</sup> Dodson, et al., 82-89.

<sup>2</sup> Quoted in Burns, 30.

<sup>3</sup> Dodson, et al., interview transcripts.

<sup>4</sup> Col James F. Slaton, interviewed by author, 13 January 1998.

<sup>5</sup> Data from Fighter Assignments Branch, HQ AFPC; current as of October 1997. Navigator manning is similar.

<sup>6</sup> Department of Defense, *Report of the Quadrennial Defense Review*, May 1997, 30. See also Gen Michael E. Ryan, "Building an Expeditionary Aerospace Force," address to the Air Force Association Air Warfare Symposium, Orlando, Fla., 27 February 1998, which reaffirms senior leadership's desire to "regroup our forces and their support into robust bases."

<sup>7</sup> Burns, 25.

<sup>8</sup> Dodson, et al., 45.

<sup>9</sup> *Objective Wing Reorganization of the 86<sup>th</sup> Fighter Wing and Kaiserslautern Military Community*, 1 October 1991, 87.

<sup>10</sup> Maj Steven O. Purtle, interviewed by author, 13 February 1998.

<sup>11</sup> Dodson, et al., 44.

## Chapter 5

### Conclusion

*In our business, there are a lot of prima donna egocentric personalities. If you can step back, look at the big picture, and realize you're a part of a larger organization, good things will happen.*

—An Air Force general officer

*What holds it all together is leadership. From the commander...right down to the flight line supervisors, teamwork is essential.*

—Gen Michael E. Ryan

Beginning with the premise that high-performing systems require leaders capable of *purposing*—building teams by providing common vision, identity, and sense of purpose—this project has asked how the Air Force develops its future leaders. Because so much of the Air Force's current identity focuses on manned flight, the project has concentrated on the basic building-block Air Force team: the flying squadron. To further narrow its focus, and to allow comparison with sister-service squadrons, the paper has specifically examined fighter squadrons since General McPeak's objective wing reorganization. Using primary and secondary source material, it has asked the leaders and the led if the Air Force is adequately preparing rated officers—who, by tradition and regulation, must command combat flying units—for their command responsibilities.

From all sources—including former commanders, maintenance officers, and senior NCOs—the answer has been “not really.” No one has claimed that the current system

has produced bad leaders, but the majority of respondents have conceded that the system could do a much better job. Specifically, the current system fails to provide enough opportunities for rated officers to learn about enlisted issues, to gain appreciation for technical maintenance requirements, and to practice genuine, hands-on leadership skills. Fortunately, however, that same majority indicates that current Air Force attitudes can support an institutional paradigm shift that puts an Air Force spin on the Navy/Marine Corps model, placing fliers in closer contact with the enlisted troops they may command. Furthermore, those respondents have provided concrete recommendations for involving aviators in a number of supervisory roles. By acting on those recommendations—especially pertinent now, given the high number of field-grade aviators filling line flying positions—the Air Force can better create its next generation of leaders.

The reader may ask, however, if it is really necessary to invest time and effort into fixing this problem. So what if commanders and senior enlisted don't see eye-to-eye? How does this purported inadequate leadership preparation affect combat readiness, and our force's ability to put bombs on target? This paper may show that Air Force members perceive a breakdown in unit cohesion and shared purpose, but what *facts* show an impact on combat effectiveness?

While no one can unequivocally prove a connection between loss of cohesion and loss of combat capability—especially in view of the increased demands on today's smaller, more heavily tasked military—one can build a strong circumstantial case that such a breakdown is negatively affecting the Air Force's ability to do its mission. Mission capable rates for some fighters are more than 15 percentage points lower than they were in 1989.<sup>1</sup> According to the Defense Department and National Center for

Health Statistics, the number of suicides in the Air Force rose from 10.0 per 100,000 members in 1991 to 16.5/100,000 in 1995.<sup>2</sup> Finally, “despite an all-out effort by the Air Force to reverse declining retention rates for both officers and enlisted members,” more and more airmen are voting with their feet.<sup>3</sup> Pilot retention has fallen from 81 percent in 1994 to 32 percent today,<sup>4</sup> while re-enlistment rates are down across the board. First term re-enlistment rates dropped from 63 percent in fiscal 1995 to 56 percent, and early outs have “knocked holes in the middle of the enlisted corps,” leaving “no experience in the middle [year groups] to grow and train the younger troops.”<sup>5</sup> Significantly, the problem is worst in fighter maintenance: “the percentage of F-16 Fighting Falcon crew chiefs in the Air Combat Command who re-enlisted in fiscal 1997 fell to 33 percent, first-term munitions systems specialists to 29 percent, and first-term aircraft armament personnel to 21 percent.”<sup>6</sup>

This problem has become the major priority for Air Force senior leadership, who admit to being at a loss to fix it.<sup>7</sup> They’ve implemented short-term economic fixes, which to date are not working; for example, the acceptance rate for the new and improved pilot bonus is only 28 percent, or 74 of the 281 pilots eligible in 1998.<sup>8</sup> The Air Force needs, then, to solve the problem from a different angle—and building cohesion at the unit level is the place to start. Air Force members should tie into a shared purpose from the beginning of their careers. Lt Col Dave Brown notes that squadron command “is the last level of finger-on-the-pulse leadership;” this research contends that a squadron commander prepared to create that shared purpose will be far more effective than one who spends the first six months of his or her tenure just learning the job. The Air Force needs to provide training and practice to replace the current on-the-job learning. Given

the technical demands of military aviation, Air Force fliers will never have the hands-on involvement of an Army or Marine platoon leader; however, having no involvement at all in the first 10 to 12 years of a career—the way fighter aircrew grow now—cannot be the way to instill responsibility and build cohesion. As one ACSC Commandant's Series speaker put it, "the older you start, the harder it is to learn."<sup>9</sup>

Shifting the aviation community's mindset from "flying and fighting" to "leading, flying and fighting" won't be easy. Numerous members of that community still cling to the "barrier" attitudes described in Chapter Three; in fact, a 1998 ACSC research project argues that fliers should lose almost all non-flying duties to concentrate solely on flying.<sup>10</sup> Nevertheless, the Air Force must make the effort, heeding Gen (ret) Russell E Dougherty's words: "Our service should not permit its internal organizational structure to become so institutionalized that these organizations take on inviolable lives of their own. We must not let those who would resist change cause us to abdicate the Air Force traditions of adaptability and flexibility."<sup>11</sup>

The recommendations outlined in chapter four take maximum advantage of that adaptability and flexibility, and will strengthen the Air Force team at its most basic level: the squadron. More importantly, they will engender understanding of the contributions made by all unit members, thereby providing the rated-officer force with the vision and skills necessary to develop truly high-performing units. Since the majority of senior leaders in the Air Force are rated—a likely condition as long as the essence of aerial warfare remains manned flight—such understanding is critical. After all, the Air Force's ultimate challenge is not merely to turn good aviators into leaders, because manned aerial combat may disappear. Instead, the Air Force must develop a generation of aviator-

leaders who so completely understand each team member's role that they can preside over their own rated community's diminution. Only then can this air and space force truly evolve into a space and air force.

### Notes

<sup>1</sup> Richard J. Newman, "Can Peacekeepers Make War?" *U.S. News and World Report* 124, no. 2 (19 January 1998): 38.

<sup>2</sup> Karen Jowers, "What The Other Services Are Doing," *Air Force Times* 56, no. 45 (10 June 1996): 14.

<sup>3</sup> John Pulley, "Running On Empty," *Air Force Times* 58, no. 32 (16 March 1998): 3.

<sup>4</sup> Charles Krohn, "The Return of Hollow Military Jeopardizes Operations and Undercuts Future Forces," *National Defense* 82, no. 533 (December 1997): 36.

<sup>5</sup> Terry Stevens, "Provide More Guidance To Enlisted," *Air Force Times* 58, no. 24 (19 January 1998): 29.

<sup>6</sup> Pulley, 3.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

<sup>8</sup> Bryant Jordan, "Still Punching Out," *Air Force Times* 58, no. 31 (9 March 1998): 3.

<sup>9</sup> Commandant's Series guests provide individual perspectives on current topics. As do other ACSC speakers, they do so on condition of anonymity.

<sup>10</sup> Maj Mark C. Nowland, *Implementing Force Structure Reductions for Air Combat Command's F-15s*, (Maxwell AFB, Ala.: ACSC, 1998).

<sup>11</sup> Gen Russell E Dougherty, "Roots and Wings, A Perspective on Reorganization," *Airpower Journal* 6, no. 2 (Summer 1992): 6. Also quoted in Burns, 36.

## **Appendix A**

### **Project Surveys**

The following pages contain the surveys administered at AWC and SNCOA to former commanders and NCOs with fighter squadron experience. Table 1 depicts the two groups' survey responses.

**Table 1. Survey Responses**

<b>Question</b>	<b>Commander Responses</b>	<b>NCO Responses</b>
1) enlisted issue knowledge	3.00	3.00
2) response to enlisted concerns	4.27	3.5
3) enlisted/officer cooperation	4.45	3.36
4) ops/maintenance teamwork	4.55	3.14
5) Air Force command prep	3.27	2.64



# Fighter Squadron Commander Survey

This survey is part of an Air Command and Staff College research project about how effectively the Air Force has developed fighter squadron commanders since the “objective wing” reorganization in 1991. Participation is voluntary and anonymous; non-participation will have no impact on school completion or career. The data will be analyzed in aggregate form. In light of your experiences as a commander, please circle the response which shows how much you agree/disagree with the following five statements, then turn the survey into the AWC orderly room .

1. When I took command, I was knowledgeable about enlisted issues.

Strongly disagree	Disagree	Neither agree nor disagree	Agree	Strongly agree
<b>1</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>4</b>	<b>5</b>

2. As a commander, I responded effectively to enlisted concerns.

<b>1</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>4</b>	<b>5</b>
----------	----------	----------	----------	----------

3. As a commander, I fostered effective enlisted/officer cooperation.

<b>1</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>4</b>	<b>5</b>
----------	----------	----------	----------	----------

4. As a commander, I developed cohesive ops/maintenance teamwork.

<b>1</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>4</b>	<b>5</b>
----------	----------	----------	----------	----------

5. The Air Force adequately prepares rated officers to be effective leaders and commanders.

Strongly disagree	Disagree	Neither agree nor disagree	Agree	Strongly agree
<b>1</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>4</b>	<b>5</b>

Please put comments on the reverse; feel free to comment on any facet of squadron-level leadership or your preparation for command. Also, please provide the following demographic data:

Rank: \_\_\_\_\_ Time in Service: \_\_\_\_\_ Date of fighter command: \_\_\_\_\_

Would you agree to a 30-minute interview? If so, please write your name and contact information on a separate sheet of paper (to preserve survey anonymity) and turn it in with the completed survey.

**Senior NCO Survey**  
**Fighter Maintenance & Support Career Fields**

This survey is part of an Air Command and Staff College research project about the effectiveness of fighter squadron commanders since the “objective wing” reorganization in 1991. Participation is voluntary and anonymous; non-participation will have no impact on school completion or career. The data will be analyzed in aggregate form. In light of your experiences since 1991, please circle the response which shows how much you agree/disagree with the following five statements, then turn the completed form into the SNCOA orderly room (Rm 137, POC is SrA Rogers).

1. My fighter squadron commanders have been knowledgeable about enlisted issues.

Strongly disagree	Disagree	Neither agree nor disagree	Agree	Strongly agree
<b>1</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>4</b>	<b>5</b>

2. My commanders have responded effectively to enlisted concerns.

<b>1</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>4</b>	<b>5</b>
----------	----------	----------	----------	----------

3. My commanders have fostered effective enlisted/officer cooperation.

<b>1</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>4</b>	<b>5</b>
----------	----------	----------	----------	----------

4. My commanders have developed cohesive ops/maintenance teamwork.

<b>1</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>4</b>	<b>5</b>
----------	----------	----------	----------	----------

5. The Air Force adequately prepares rated officers to be effective leaders and commanders.

Strongly disagree	Disagree	Neither agree nor disagree	Agree	Strongly agree
<b>1</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>4</b>	<b>5</b>

Please put comments on the reverse; feel free to comment on any facet of squadron-level leadership. Also, please provide the following demographic data:

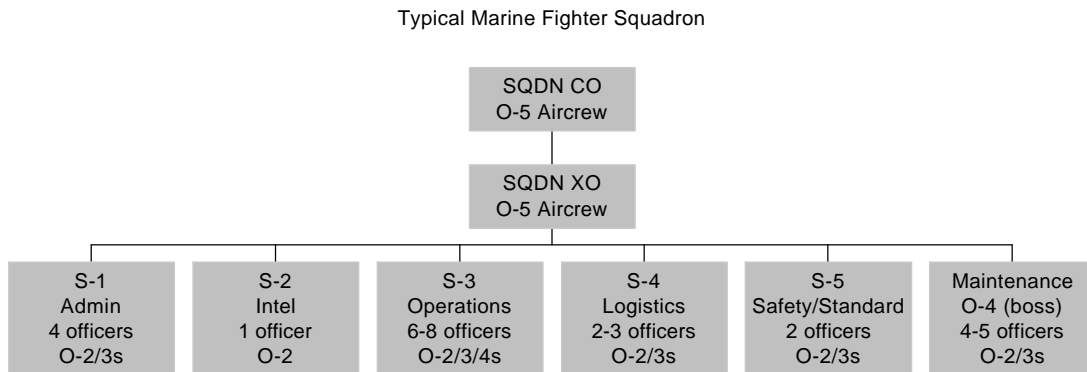
Rank: \_\_\_\_\_ Time in Service: \_\_\_\_\_ Career field title: \_\_\_\_\_  
 Date/title of your last fighter squadron job: \_\_\_\_\_

Would you agree to a 30-minute interview, either in person or by phone? If so, please write your name and contact information on a separate sheet of paper (to preserve survey anonymity) and turn it in with the completed survey.

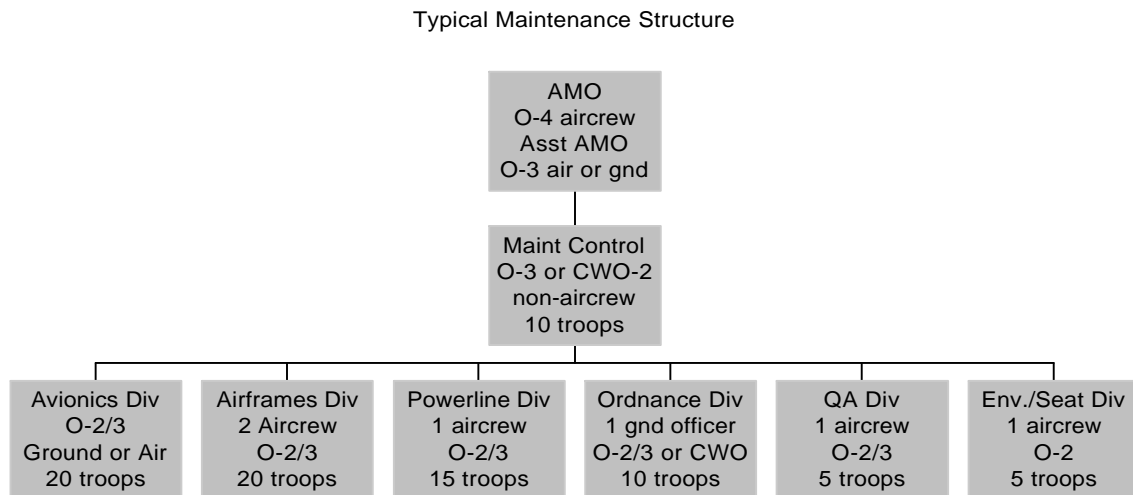
## Appendix B

### Typical Marine Fighter Squadron

The following charts summarize Lt Col Barnhart's description of a Marine squadron, noting where aviators are typically assigned. AMO is Aircraft Maintenance Officer.



**Figure 3. Marine Squadron Organization**



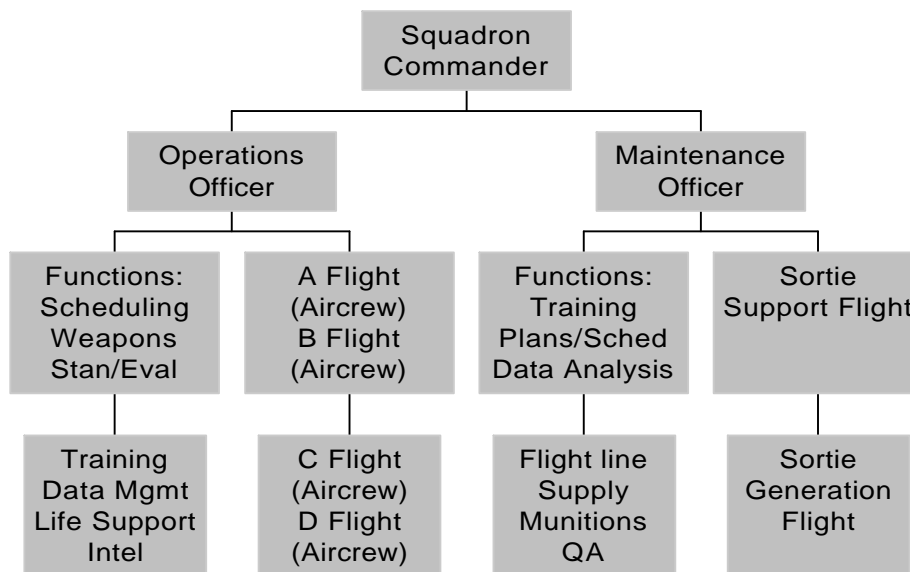
**Figure 4. Marine Maintenance Organization**

## Appendix C

### Typical Air Force Fighter Squadron

For comparison, this chart (modified from AFI 38-101 to show functional areas) depicts an Air Force fighter squadron. The operations officer oversees three or four flights, whose officers man various functional shops. The maintenance officer oversees two flights, whose personnel likewise work in various functional areas. Significantly, no aviators work anywhere in the maintenance chain. This research has proposed assigning aviators as assistant maintenance officers and maintenance flight commanders, and consolidating related operations and maintenance functions under rated shop chiefs.

Typical Air Force Fighter Squadron



**Figure 5. Air Force Squadron Organization**

## *Bibliography*

- Air Force Instruction 38-101. *Air Force Organization*. 11 February 1993.
- Bertholf, Lt Col David J. "What Is and Where Is the United States Air Force Leadership Doctrine?" Research report. Maxwell AFB, Ala.: Air War College, April 1995.
- Bird, Julie. "USAFE Objective Wing Pluses and Minuses." *Air Force Times* 52, no. 50 (20 July 1992): 4.
- Builder, Carl H. *The Icarus Syndrome*. New Brunswick, N.J.: Transaction Publishers, 1993.
- Burns, Lt Col Walter L. "The Objective Wing: A Critical Analysis." Research report. Maxwell AFB, Ala.: Air War College, April 1995.
- Canan, James W. "The End of the Stovepipe." *Air Force Magazine* 75, no. 6 (June 1992): 32-36.
- . "One Base, One Wing, One Boss." *Air Force Magazine* 74, no. 8 (August 1991): 17-19.
- Department of Defense, *Report of the Quadrennial Defense Review*, May 1997.
- Dodson, Maj James D., et al. "Leadership Development in the Objective Squadron." Research Report no. AU-ACSC-96-201. Maxwell AFB, Ala.: Air Command and Staff College, April 1996.
- Jordan, Bryant. "Still Punching Out," *Air Force Times* 58, no. 31 (9 March 1998): 3.
- Jowers, Karen. "What the Other Services Are Doing," *Air Force Times* 56, no. 45 (10 June 1996): 14.
- Krohn, Charles A. "The Return of Hollow Military Jeopardizes Operations and Undercuts Future Forces," *National Defense* 82, no. 533 (December 1997): 36.
- Kouzes, James M. and Posner, Barry Z. *The Leadership Challenge: How to Get Extraordinary Things Done in Organizations*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, Inc., 1987.
- Lester, Richard I. and Glenn A. Morton, eds. *AU-24 Concepts for Air Force Leadership*. Maxwell AFB, Ala.: Air University Press, 1990.
- McPeak, Gen Merrill A. *Selected Works 1990-1994*. Maxwell AFB, Ala.: Air University Press, 1995.
- Newman, Richard J. "Can Peacekeepers Make War?" *U.S. News and World Report* 124, no. 2 (19 January 1998): 38-44.
- Objective Wing Reorganization of the 86<sup>th</sup> Fighter Wing and Kaiserslautern Military Community*. Ramstein AB, Germany: 86<sup>th</sup> Fighter Wing, 1 October 1991.
- Pulley, John. "Running on Empty," *Air Force Times* 58, no. 32 (16 March 1998): 3.
- Rawlins, Col Addison C., III. "Fighter Squadron Organization (A Fresh Look)." Research Report no. AU-AWC-85-175. Maxwell AFB, Ala.: Air War College, March 1985.

- Ryan, Gen Michael E., chief of staff, US Air Force. "Building an Expeditionary Aerospace Force." Address. Air Force Association Air Warfare Symposium, Orlando, Fla., 27 February 1998.
- Sheets, Lt Col Gary D. "A History of Wing-Base Organization and Considerations for Change." Research Report no. AU-AWC-78-474. Maxwell AFB, Ala: Air War College, April 1978.
- Smith, Perry M. *Taking Charge: A Practical Guide for Leaders*. Washington, D.C.: National Defense University Press, 1986.
- Stevens, Terry, "Provide More Guidance to Enlisted," *Air Force Times* 58, no. 24 (19 January 1998): 29.
- Vaill, Peter B. *Managing as a Performing Art*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, Inc., 1989.

DISTRIBUTION A:

Approved for public release; distribution is unlimited.

Air Command and Staff College  
Maxwell AFB, Al 36112